

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 17, 2003

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STATE HEALTH DEPARTMENT WARNS OF RISKS OF EATING RAW SHELLFISH

(Richmond, Va.)—The Virginia Department of Health is warning people of the risks associated with eating raw shellfish. So far this year three Virginians have become ill and one person has died from *Vibrio* bacteria in raw shellfish.

“We are seeing illnesses earlier than usual this year associated with people eating raw shellfish, such as oysters, containing *Vibrio* bacteria,” noted Robert B. Stroube, M.D., M.P.H. “For people with certain medical conditions, eating raw molluscan shellfish can cause serious illness or death. We want people to understand the risks of eating raw shellfish.”

Different kinds of *Vibrio* bacteria are found naturally in coastal waters and are not a result of pollution. *Vibrio* bacteria can be found in waters approved for oyster and clam harvesting. During the warm weather months, more of the bacteria can be found in shellfish and the risk is higher.

One particular kind of *Vibrio* bacteria (*Vibrio vulnificus*) can cause serious illness or even death for people considered high risk. People at "high risk" include those who have liver disease, excessive alcohol intake, diabetes, AIDS or HIV infection, stomach disorders, inflammatory bowel disease, cancer, abnormal iron metabolism, steroid dependency or any illness or medical treatment which results in a weakened immune system. Older adults are more likely to have the specific health conditions and should be aware of how their health status affects their risk of getting other illnesses.

Vibrio bacteria do not change the appearance, taste, or odor of oysters or clams. Eating raw oysters or clams with hot sauce or while drinking alcohol does not destroy the bacteria. Only thoroughly cooking the oysters or clams will destroy the bacteria and eliminate risk of infection.

“Eating thoroughly cooked shellfish does not pose a health threat,” explained Stroube. “Regardless of age or health history, the *Vibrio* bacteria can cause a gastrointestinal illness in people who eat raw or undercooked oysters or clams; however, those people who are considered high risk should be especially careful to avoid eating raw or undercooked shellfish.”

Symptoms of illness from *Vibrio* bacteria include vomiting, diarrhea, stomach pains, severe weakness, skin rashes, shaking chills and high fever. If you have any of these symptoms, see your doctor for medical treatment.

Infection also can occur when cuts, burns or sores are exposed to seawater containing *Vibrio* bacteria. If you get a cut or wound while in the water, clean the wound with soap and water or a disinfectant, such as hydrogen peroxide. If you notice signs of infection, such as redness or swelling, see your doctor.

For more information, log onto the Virginia Department of Health’s Web site at www.vdh.state.va.us.

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